

was Mr. Nobody. Make of that name what you will. Likely Ramona and I shared a certain lack of parental attention.)

Snow comes when I need a bit of courage. In real life, I plan to visit Ireland this fall, to meet cousins from a village at the southern end of the Wicklow Mountains. I can get nervous travelling alone. But Snow is unfettered by needless fears and joined me on a fantasy prequel to the real trip.

Here's one bonus of travelling with an imaginary dog instead of a real one. No interdictions. How did Snow get across the Atlantic Ocean? I don't know. It didn't figure in my fantasy. I wasn't going to put her in the hold of an airplane, and then what, quarantine? My imaginary dog and I jumped over that part to the foggy afternoon Snow and I strode the Wicklow Way, and there met an Irish dog named Rain. Rain was not a poodle but tall and thin like one, with a drab grey coat that turned radiant in the fleeting sun. Snow and Rain ran far ahead on the bare mountain paths, always coming back to check on me. When I sprained my ankle on a slippery slope, Snow stayed with me while Rain ran for help. They became momentarily famous local heroes.

Is Snow compensatory for a life that might have been better lived, one without darkness and divorce, when the poodles were black instead of snow white? Possibly. Snow does howl in the night. But she isn't introspective. I might wonder where these precipitation names come from — precipitate, precipice? — but Snow doesn't share the modern fascination with our inner lives. Snow simply is, there to be accepted or rejected her on her own terms.

Here's a plot twist, and not an imaginary one: Last month my family arrived for the launch of my new book — brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews. My own kids who lived nearby piled in too, so I had a full house. Every bed, couch and cot was deployed; every blanket I owned draped over someone's shoulders when they shuffled into the kitchen for breakfast. This was happiness.

One afternoon of the full house I arrived home to tremendous excitement. "You'll never believe what happened," said my brother Tim. "A white poodle came to the front door and walked right in." Tim showed me pictures of this dog on everyone's laps, like she'd been here all along. "We all fell in love with her," my family clamoured to tell me.

I studied the photos. She was smaller than Snow. But obviously was Snow manifested. That real Snow arrived when my house was full of real companions made me wonder if maybe I had gone batty making up a dog to live with.

"No collar," Tim said. "We named her Pickles."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "Her name is Snow."

My daughter Mary had the good sense to knock on the neighbours'

doors. The woman two houses down wept when she was reunited with her poodle. I don't know what she called it, and I don't want to. I felt like that white dog really was destined for me.

"Aunt Cathrin," said my niece Claire, visiting from Montreal. "Maybe this means you need a real white dog in your life?"

Perhaps. But then what would happen to Snow? And the puppy Snow and Rain were going to have together, named Sleet?

CATHRIN BRADBURY'S NEW BOOK, "THIS WAY UP," IS PUBLISHED BY PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE CANADA. REACH HER VIA EMAIL: MCBRAD-BURY@GMAIL.COM.

Dogs are man's best friend — but dog owners are a close second

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Single women of a certain age often wonder who will care for them if they have an accident or become ill, especially when they live a fair distance from relatives, as I do.

Well, now I know.

In the early spring, I was chatting with my neighbours at the park where we run our dogs every morning when I was taken out from behind by a big, super-fast, frisky dog. I literally flew sideways through the air before landing my back, knocking the wind out of me.

My girlfriend screamed "don't move!" fearing I had broken my back.

As I lay motionless on the ground, the firefighter in our pack got down with me and spoke calmly and gently until I could breathe again. After assessing it was safe to do so, he and the others helped me to a

rock to sit on, where my dog, Daisy, promptly placed her left paw over my right leg in a protective gesture. Once I had regained some composure, they walked me the few blocks home — I insisted on no ambulance — with one of them taking Daisy by her leash.

And the kindness and concern didn't stop there. Another dog-owning neighbour offered to watch Daisy (you never know how long you will be in emergency) and drive me to the hospital. Still in shock, I declined the drive. I was diagnosed with multiple rib fractures, a torn MCL in my left knee and a back injury. When I returned home, my lovely neighbour gave me Daisy back — plus a homemade lasagna and salad for dinner that night.

Dogs may be man's best friend, but dog owners are life savers. My dog-walking friends organized a schedule to walk Daisy. They did my groceries, brought me dinners, soups, pecan tarts and even surprised me with a chocolate Easter egg!

I had only known these neighbours for a few short years, but they treated me like a lifelong friend.

What they couldn't do — or at least I didn't feel comfortable asking — was stay with me overnight.

That's where Daisy soared! Getting out of bed with fractured ribs and a torn knee ligament involved rotating the top of my body as gently as I could so as not to make my ribs spasm until I could push up on my good arm to try to sit up.

It was scary. One wrong move and I would tumble off the bed.

That's when Daisy came to the rescue.

The first night I struggled, she came in from the living room where she sleeps and sat in front of the exact spot I would fall from if I fell out of bed. I tried to move her, but she wouldn't budge. She was my safety net.

Another night, I was in so much pain and so frustrated, I thought I would weep. At that point Daisy (who is part husky, a breed known for their aloofness) turned and licked my face, then ran to the end of the bed and licked my feet. She continued alternating between my face and my feet, until all I could do was laugh. Well, not out loud. That hurt my ribs. I got the hint and I finally got up.

It became a daily ritual. Each morning Daisy urged me to get up and, not wanting to disappoint her, I complied. Slowly we headed back out on the trails. Daisy stayed at my side, ignoring rabbits and squirrels, and on extra high alert for anything she saw as a danger to me.

Recently, while outside talking with neighbours, Daisy spotted a dog across the street. It looked a lot like the dog that took me out and Daisy began barking ferociously. My friends and I were perplexed. Daisy is not a barker. Then one said: "OMG! She's telling that dog not to come near you!"

I believe that was exactly what Daisy was doing. She is my hero. As are the friends and neighbours who carried me through this dark and difficult period.

I'm recovering — thank you physiotherapists! And instead of feeling sorry for myself, I feel grateful I have loyal friends I can count on. That includes my sweet Daisy.

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SUSAN KAO/TORONTO STAR ILLUSTRATION